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AUTHOR Kamisli, Sibel; Dugan, Sean
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how educated non-native speakers of English perceive three distinct accents of American English (Eastern; African American; and Southern) and make judgments of the speakers' background, intellect, ability, and character that might affect their employment overseas. Subjects were 53 native speakers of Turkish, (44 females, 13 males, aged 18-20), students at an English-medium university in Turkey. They listened to recordings of three male individuals with the different accents in mock employment interviews, then role- played a language center director assessing the candidates on their teaching ability and knowledge of subject matter, successful adjustment to Turkish culture and specifically its educational system, and their estimated length of stay in Turkey. Eighteen pairs of personality traits were considered. Results indicate that accent has an important impact on evaluation of the speaker, and may affect employment opportunities. The subjects rated the individual with a Southern accent highest, the Eastern accent second, and the African American lowest. However, ratings of the last two did not differ greatly from each other. (Contains 24 references.) (MSE)

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Speech Perception, EFL/ESL

Sibel Kamisli and Sean Dugan

Bosphorous University and Mercy College

Faculty of Education
Department of Foreign
LanguageEducation
Bebek, 80815
Istanbul, Turkey
Tel: 0216 336 20 58 (home)
0212 263 15 40 ext: 1797 (office)
Fax: 0216 336 81 06
E-mail: kamisli@boun.edu.tr

Mercy College
555 Broadway,
Dobbs Ferry
New York 10522, USA
Tel: (914) 693-4500
Fax: (914) 693-4133
E-mail: Seand667819aol.com.

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Nonnative Speakers' Speech Perception of Native Speakers

Sibel Kamışlı and Sean Dugan

Bosphorus University and Mercy College

Abstract

It has long been a recognized and commonly-held truth that an accent and a dialect may affect a listener's judgement of a speaker's background, intellect, ability, and character. In line with this trend of thought, this study aims at investigating how nonnative speakers of English perceive three distinct accents of American English, namely Eastern American, Southern American, and African American accents, make judgements about the backgrounds of these native speakers based on their accents, and, consequently, determine their possible employment overseas. Findings indicate that accent is a determining factor in making judgements about a speaker's personality and his/her teaching ability.

Introduction

Research on accent perception has gained prominence in the field of sociolinguistics, particularly since the early 1960's, when Lambert and his associates used the 'matched-guise technique' to investigate listeners' evaluative reactions to English and varieties of French spoken in Montreal. Since then, the scope of investigation has widened to include pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural concerns. Among the areas most studied are accent convergence and divergence (Bourhis, Giles, and Tajfel 1973; Doise, Sinclair, and Bourhis 1976), which demonstrated that a speaker may alter his/her level of speech formality depending on his/her motivations. These could be 'integrative', if seeking approval of the listener, or 'disassociative', if the speaker does not approve of the listener or wishes to maintain or accentuate group identity.

Empirical data indicate that there exists a hierarchy of dialects within English. In Britain, RP continues to be the most prestigious accent, while regional accents occupy somewhat lower positions (Edwards, 1982; Macaulay, 1988; Strongman and Woolsey, 1967). The so-called "Network Standard," a neutral dialect devoid of any regionalism regarding word choice or accent, is

viewed as the most desirable in the United States for its integrity with other dialectal forms viewed much less favorably (Ryan and Carranza, 1975; Shuy, 1969). Interestingly, however, one cross-cultural study, (Stewart, Ryan, and Giles, 1985) demonstrated that American listeners ascribed higher social status to speakers of British English than to speakers of American English, perhaps suggesting lingering colonial admiration for the 'mother country' after more than 200 years of independence.

Ethnic stereotyping can also be reinforced by accent perception (Bourhis, Giles, Leyens, and Tajfel, 1979; Foon, 1986; Gardner and Taylor, 1968; Giles and Sassoon 1983; Lambert, Anisfeld and Yeni-Kosmshian, 1965; Strongman and Woosley, 1967). For instance, in the multilingual community of Belgium, Bourhis et al. (1979) found that the perception of ethnic threat from an outgroup Francophone speaker in English was perceived positively by ingroup Flemish subjects. In contrast, all Flemish subjects reacted negatively to a Francophone speaker whose ethnic identity they were aware of to begin with. Furthermore, they evaluated the speaker in terms of ethnicity, stating their disagreement in their ingroup language. This finding is supported in Bourhis and Giles's study (1977) in which a Welshman's ethnolinguistic identity was threatened by the outgroup English, thus leading the ingroup to broaden their Welsh accents in English.

In professions, it has been shown that accent can influence attitudes and even objectivity and stereotyping prevails in advance of meeting the speaker (Hewitt, 1971; Sladen, 1982; Vru and Winkel, 1994). Sladen's (1982) black and white subjects gave higher ratings when client and counsellor were of the same race and class while Hewitt's (1971) prospective Anglo teachers downgraded the speech of African American English speakers.

Similarly, in employment, accent is clearly a determining factor, for it is here that personal qualities such as ability, integrity, skill, and level of education, among others, are judged comparatively. A number of studies have demonstrated that language does affect hiring possibilities for applicants (De la

Zerda and Hopper, 1979; Edwards, 1982; Eltis 1980; Giles and Powesland, 1975; Seggie, Fulmizi and Stewart, 1982).

Speech perception has also spurred a number of studies in the field of language teaching. There has been inquiry into native speaker reaction to nonnative speech and also nonnative speakers' speech perception of native speakers. Studies on the former (Ervin, 1977; Fayer and Krasinski, 1987; Galloway, 1980) showed that nonnative speakers were more critical to flaws in nonnative speakers' speech. Other studies (Ensz, 1982; Gynan, 1985; Politzer, 1978; Schairer, 1992) indicated the significance of the linguistic aspect of language on native speakers' reactions to nonnative speech.

Most studies on nonnative speakers' speech perception of native speakers, on the other hand, have been based on accent (Eisenstein, 1982, 1986; Eisenstein and Verdi, 1985). The findings revealed that proficiency level plays an important role in making judgements about the native speakers and only at the advanced level do adult learners form native-like attitudes and stereotypes about the standard and non-standard varieties of American English. In terms of friendliness, appearance, intelligibility, and job status, adult ESL learners rated the speakers of standard American English the highest, "New Yorkese" next, and Black English the lowest.

Although a number of studies have been conducted on native speakers' perception of non-native and native speakers as well as nonnative speakers' perception of native speakers, there seems to be limited research conducted in an EFL context, based on accent in relation to proficient nonnative speakers' judgement of native speakers' background, intellect, ability and character with respect to their employment opportunities overseas. Given the influence and acceptance of American culture worldwide, however grudgingly by some, this research seeks to answer the following questions: How do competent, educated, nonnative speakers of English evaluate the personal qualities and professional abilities of speakers of three American dialects: Eastern American, Southern American, and African American? Would their assessments influence hiring practices?

Method

Fifty-seven native speakers of Turkish, (44 females, 13 males, aged between 18-20) from a large urban English-medium university in Turkey participated in this study. At the time of the study, the subjects were in the third year of a four-year teacher preparation program specializing to be teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at various levels of education in Turkey.

Following the studies on accent perception (e.g., Strongman and Woosley, 1967), the subjects were first asked to evaluate the audiotaped speakers of American English distinctly representing three accents of American English, namely Eastern American accent (henceforth Speaker I), Southern American accent (henceforth Speaker II), and African American accent (henceforth Speaker III). To avoid a possible confounding factor, the content of this mock interview was held constant i.e., the male job applicants were interviewed for employment in Turkey. The interview revealed their knowledge about Turkish culture and its educational system. Immediately after listening to each interview, the subjects completed a questionnaire adopted from Strongman and Woosley (1967). They rated each 'interviewee' on 18 pairs of personality traits (generous-mean; sociable-unsociable; good-looking-unattractive; serious-frivolous; talkative-restrained; irritable-good-natured; dishonest-honest; imaginative-hard-headed; sense of humour-humourless; ambitious-laissez-faire; unpopular-popular; intelligent-dull; self-confident-shy; unreliable-reliable; determined-unsure; entertaining-boring; kind-hearted-cold-hearted; industrious-lazy) based on a five-point scale (e.g., Generous 1 2 3 4 5 Mean).

Twenty randomly selected subjects were then asked to role play a director of a language center, evaluating the 'interviewees' on their teaching ability and knowledge of the subject matter, successful adjustment to Turkish culture and specifically to its educational system, and their estimated length of stay in Turkey.

Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The mean scores of the eighteen pairs of personality traits of each speaker were calculated by using t-tests and then the speakers were compared: Speaker I vs. Speaker II, Speaker II vs. Speaker III, and Speaker I vs. Speaker III. The audiotaped role plays were transcribed and emerging patterns were noted and used for cross-validating the statistical results.

Results and Discussion

Significant differences were observed between Speaker I and Speaker II in terms of only five out of 18 personality traits: good-looking, serious, ambitious, determined, and industrious. While the ratings were in favor of Speaker I at four personality traits i.e., serious ($t=-2.68$, $p<.01$), ambitious ($t=-2.41$, $p<.02$), determined ($t=-2.47$, $p>.02$), and industrious ($t=-3.87$, $p<.000$), only one personality trait i.e., good-looking ($t=.66$, $p<.000$) was attributed to Speaker II. Although the Turkish subjects did not evaluate Speaker I and II as being very different except for five personality features, their preferance was more towards Speaker I than Speaker II (see Appendix A Table I).

Thirteen out of 18 personality traits (i.e., sociable, good-looking, serious, talkative, dishonest, imaginative, sense of humour, unpopular, intelligent, self-confident, determined, entertaining, and industrious) represented the difference between Speaker III and Speaker II. Of the 18 traits, four were attributed to Speaker III and the others to Speaker II. Speaker II was claimed to be more sociable ($t=-6.02$, $p<.001$), talkative ($t=-4.04$, $p<.000$), imaginative ($t=-2.12$, $p<.04$), humorous ($t=2.18$, $p<.03$), intelligent ($t=-4.44$, $p<.004$), self-confident ($t=-3.53$, $p<,001$), determined ($t=-3.36$, $p<.001$), entertaining ($t=1.93$, $p<.000$), and industrious ($t=-2.55$, $p<.01$). Speaker III, on the other hand, was evaluated positively on traits of good-looking ($t=-3.81$, $p<.000$), and seriousness ($t=-2.02$, $p<.05$), while negative on traits of honesty ($t=2.19$, $p<.03$) and popularity ($t=4.06$, $p<.000$). Attributing eight positive personality features to Speaker II and only five to

Speaker III showed that the Turkish subjects preferred Speaker II to Speaker III (see Appendix A Table II).

Significant differences were noted between Speaker I and III on 13 out of 18 personality traits. These were sociable, talkative, irritable, dishonest, ambitious, unpopular, intelligent, self-confident, unreliable, determined, entertaining, kind-hearted, and industrious. Speaker II was evaluated as being more sociable ($t=-6.02$, $p<.000$), talkative ($t=-5.27$, $p<.000$), ambitious ($t=-3.98$, $p<.000$), intelligent ($t=-3.97$, $p<.000$), self confident ($t=-5.20$, $p<.004$), determined ($t=-3.36$, $p<.000$), entertaining ($t=-4.22$, $p<.000$), kind-hearted ($t=-3.97$, $p<.000$), and industrious ($t=-5.11$, $p<.000$). Speaker I, on the other hand, was rated negatively on traits of honesty ($t=3.22$, $p<.002$), popularity ($t=3.26$, $p<.002$), and reliability ($t=2.63$, $p<.011$). The Turkish subjects clearly favored Speaker I over Speaker III. To them, Speaker III seemed to reflect the positive personality traits (see Appendix A Table III).

The subjects claimed that in addition to being determined and self-confident, Speaker I had the necessary social skills to establish good relationships with students and colleagues, consequently, creating a conducive environment essential for teaching. One subject stated: "Speaker I sounded more reliable and self-confident, but most importantly sociable which is a must to be a teacher. A teacher needs to form rapport with the students, and his colleagues." Consequently, it became clear why Turkish subjects thought very highly of Speaker I in comparison to Speaker II and Speaker III.

Points that the subjects valued in Speaker I were his excitement about teaching and pride in his profession. Thus, they rated Speaker I over the others during the role-play: "Speaker I seems to like teaching much more than the others. He also sounds more serious and determined in what he is doing. He sounds as if he knows what he is doing." The student stated that knowing the subject matter and having experience in teaching were important factors in job screening. They correlated years of experience positively with interest in teaching: "He has an interesting character. He seems to have been teaching for some time. Experienced teachers make the lesson enjoyable." These positively

viewed attributes showed the subjects that the interviewee genuinely cared about his students: "Because he is sociable and he does care about how the students will learn and wants them to have fun while learning, he will choose appropriate teaching methods. He seems to have a variety of language teaching activities in his repertoire."

Job applicants' exposure to the host culture, familiarity with the foreign culture and genuine interest in the host culture were also determining factors. From one subject's point of view Speaker II and Speaker III sounded more "into business" rather than "into Turkey" itself while Speaker I seemed "to be much more knowledgeable about Turkey in addition to being more adaptable to and interested in a foreign culture than the others, therefore that he could stay 2-3 years."

Based on the accents of native speakers of American English, the Turkish subjects as prospective teachers of TEFL evaluated Speaker I the highest, Speaker II the next and Speaker III the lowest. In addition, in terms of employment, job applicant's social skills, knowing and enjoying the subject matter were perceived to be important, and interest in adapting to the Turkish culture.

Conclusion

This study investigated whether accent plays a significant role in influencing the listener's judgement about the speaker's intellect, ability and character. It specifically examined Turkish nonnative speakers of English subjects' perception of native speakers of American English representing three different dialects of American English (i.e., Eastern American, and Southern American, and African American). Furthermore, it studied to what extent the accent of a native speaker of American English determines his/her employment opportunity as a TEFL teacher overseas.

Findings of the study revealed that accent has an important impact on the speaker's evaluation and that language effects employment opportunities for applicants. In other words, accent perception plays a powerful role in our

judgements of others and can influence how and why a speaker might adjust his/her speech to gain acceptance by the perceived dominant group. Such intuitive or calculated adjustments in speech are well-warranted.

By pointing out that accent is a determining factor in employment, this study confirms the findings of other studies by De la Zerda and Hopper (1979) Edwards (1982), Eltis (1980), and Giles and Powesland (1975). Like Hewitt's (1971) study on Anglo teachers, these prospective teachers of TEFL downgraded the speech of African American English speakers.

The proficient adult nonnative speakers of English of this study rated the standard American English the highest, South American next, Black English the lowest in terms of positive personality traits and possible employment abroad. However, their ratings for standard American English and Black English did not differ widely. To a certain extent their rankings were similar to those of Eisenstein and Verdi's adult ESL learners who rated the speakers of standard American English the highest, New Yorkese next, and the Black English the lowest in terms of friendliness, appearance, and job status. In other words, the ranking of American accents by Turkish EFL subjects showed that there exists a hierarchy of dialects within American English, but this hierarchy is different for these TEFL students. They viewed regional accent much more favorably than the standard. This finding supports those of Shuy (1969) and Ryan and Carranza's (1975) which showed that the standard dialect was favoured more than the regional ones. This outcome supports that perhaps a language learner is equipped with issues related to culture such as biases, stereotypes both when being exposed to a language in its own context and learning it as a foreign language.

One of the pedagogical implications of this study is the significance of the ESL/EFL teachers' knowledge of the subject matter. ESL/EFL teacher preparation programs should focus on equipping the prospective ESL/EFL teachers with theory as well as practice. Perhaps, considerable attention should be given to language and language learning theories and how these can be applied successfully in language classrooms. Practice teaching and courses like

materials preparation should be considered equally important to other components of teacher preparation.

Also, knowing the host culture seems to be important for employment opportunities abroad of prospective ESL/EFL native speakers of American English. Genuine interest in the host culture is appreciated and expected if this group of teachers wants to gain overseas experience. Consequently, ESL/EFL programs abroad should offer more courses on cross-cultural communication and perhaps prepare prospective teachers specialized to teach in specific cultures. This necessitates background studies on several native cultures.

In the teaching of a foreign language, particularly in teacher training programs, it is incumbent upon both instructor and student to acknowledge the presence of dialects in the target language and to consider their place in the society. To do so, at the later stages of English study, the study of accents should be included in the curriculum, particularly in pronunciation lessons. ESL and particularly EFL students can be exposed to varieties of English spoken in the world and regional and dialectal forms of varieties of English through videos and audiotapes. Such an activity, with accompanying reading materials concerning that particular culture, for instance immigration patterns in the United States and discussions about present political debates about language policy, would provide the students with invaluable understanding of the country.

The findings of this study should be interpreted within its limitations. A larger group of subjects would strengthen the findings and in addition allow us to make better generalizations related to non-native speakers' accent perception of native speakers in EFL contexts. Also, studies that use videotaped rather than audiotaped interviews are essential. Then better pictures of language behavior i.e., the impact of accent accompanied by nonverbal language i.e., mime or gestures would be revealed. Testing subjective reactions to speech has both pedagogical and theoretical value. It is important to assess attitudes of foreign language learners towards target language teachers, to study convergence and divergence, and gender variables, among others (Gaies and Beebe, 1991).

This study pointed out the significance of accents in speech perception i.e., the important role that accent plays in determining how listeners make judgements of speaker's characteristics (e.g., background, intellect) and possible employment. However, it also revealed that there is a need for more studies of cultures in the world which have not been studied from this perspective.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1- Comparison of Speaker1 vs. Speaker 2

Traits		Good-looking	Serious	Ambitious	Determined	Industrious
Mean	S1	3. 10	1.91	1. 90	1. 60	1. 63
	S2	2. 35	2.41	2. 31	2. 03	2. 13
Standard	S1	. 80	1.02	1. 01	1	. 91
Deviation	S2	1. 03	1. 18	1. 12	1. 04	1. 02
Significance		. 000***	. 01*	. 02*	. 02*	. 000***

*p< .01
*p< .02
***p< .000

APPENDIX A

Table 2- Comparison of Speaker 2 vs. Speaker 3

Traits		Sociable	Good-looking	Serious	Talkative	Dishonest	Imaginative	Sense of Humor	Unpopular	Intelligent	Self-confident	Determined	Entertaining	Industrious
Mean	S2	2. 07	2. 34	2. 43	1. 71	3. 72	2. 60	2. 80	3. 52	2. 06	1. 78	2. 08	2. 68	2.13
	S3	2. 81	2. 16	1. 98	1. 93	3.3	3.1	3. 32	2. 62	2. 70	2.47	2. 72	3. 77	2. 54
Standard	S2	1. 13	1. 02	1. 19	0.91	. 88	1.21	1.3	1. 13	. 83	1	1. 01	1. 38	1. 03
Deviation	S3	1. 05	1. 04	1. 08	. 97	1	1.11	1.18	1. 10	1. 03	1. 06	1. 01	1.05	1
Significance		. 001***	. 000***	. 05*	. 000***	. 03*	. 04*	0.03*	. 000***	. 000***	. 001***	. 001***	. 000***	. 01*

*p< .01 ***p< .001
*p< .03 ***p< . 000
*p< .04
*p< .05

APPENDIX A

Table 3- Comparison of Speaker 1 vs. Speaker 3

Traits		Sociable	Talkative	Irratible	Dishonest	Ambitious	Unpopular	Intelligent	Self-confident	Unreliable	Determined	Entertaining	Kind-hearted	Industrious
Mean	S1	1. 89	1. 71	3. 65	4	1. 90	3. 35	2	1. 78	3. 77	1. 60	3. 11	2. 50	1. 66
	S3	2. 81	2. 73	3. 20	3. 33	2. 67	2. 67	2. 70	2. 47	3. 36	2. 75	3. 80	3. 29	2. 57
Standard	S1	. 77	. 92	1. 13	1. 07	1. 02	. 90	1	1	1. 14	. 96	. 93	1	. 92
Deviation	S3	1. 05	1. 16	1. 10	. 97	1. 15	1.07	1	. 14	. 92	1. 03	1. 03	1	. 97
Significance		. 000***	. 000***	. 03*	. 002**	. 000***	. 002**	. 000***	. 004**	. 011*	. 000***	. 000***	. 000***	. 000***

*p< .01 **p< .004
*p< .03 ***p< .000
**p< .002